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DRY ALBERTA

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In the work of collecting data for "The Range Men" I gathered considerable related to the Liquor Traffic of the Dry Days of the eighties in Alberta. I do not think that many citizens who experienced those times will admit that the system was a success. Now that there is again an active interest being taken in the Liquor Traffic by the general public I feel that information concerning the first Prohibition experiment of the government might prove of value to those of the public who wish to see both sides of the question as intelligently as possible.

THE AUTHOR.

Alberta and the Canadian Northwest have experienced various conditions of liquor traffic, passing from extreme to extreme and going through intermediate stages. In the days when the Hudson's Bay and the Northwest Companies ruled the land the traffic in liquor was limited only to such quantities as the companies could bring in by means of all their boats, canoes, carts and freighting crews. The only people who could not get all the liquor they could drink were those more or less unfortunates who had not enough furs to pay for it. Liquor was a recognized medium of exchange for furs and hides, and the natives drank just as often and just as much as they could earn in trapping, fighting or stealing. Their limit of drinking was set by whatever they had to exchange, and by their physical capacities. The Hudson's Bay Company dealt in a rum of its own brand, the Northwest people in a beverage which they called "high wine" and later mixed with water for trading purposes. Whether they mixed one or four or ten parts water they received the same value per dram, the blending being based upon the sophistication of the particular natives with whom they dealt. Throughout the whole wide land it was infradig not to get exceedingly and brutally drunk whenever at a trading post. Horrible crimes and terrible excesses resulted.

Whenever men make money other men will always come to share the profits. Consequently after the two big companies had located, fought, amalgamated and settled down to a nice monopoly which brought dividends in enormous figures there grew up an opposition trade. These "free traders," as they were called, came chiefly from the American side of the boundary, and their stock in trade was mainly whisky. They went into territories where the Hudson's Bay people had found it too dangerous to locate, they went also to the

The contempt for the prohibitory laws of Alberta, the success of smugglers, the possibilities of protection by illegal use of permits encouraged other irregularities, chief of which were drunkenness and gambling. From the boundary to the northern limits gambling flourished and was almost as difficult to handle as the liquor traffic. In spite of the fact that throughout all the "dry" years the proportion of police to population was never less than one constable to every ten white men, the police admitted that they found it impossible to keep down liquor smuggling, and that gambling was almost as difficult owing to contempt for law brought on by the helplessness shown by the police with regards to whisky smuggling.

very gates of the Company forts and stole trade from under the very noses of the factors. As time passed it became no new or strange sight to see Indians, drunk with the whisky of the free traders, fighting savagely amongst themselves outside of some Hudson's Bay post while the free traders went off with their peltries and furs and the Company traders gritted their teeth in impotent rage as they looked on the untouched kegs and empty warehouse within the walls of their stockades.

But these things came to an end, partly through agitations of missionaries, partly through pressure which the Hudson's Bay Company itself brought to bear at Ottawa in an effort to put the free traders out of business. The result of these complaints was an investigation which showed that the Indians were certainly terribly demoralized by alcoholic excesses. In consequence the North West Mounted Police was organized and dispatched to take charge of affairs in the territories, and the government enacted an ordinance which made the territories absolutely "dry" as far as laws went. No liquor could be sold or disposed of or taken into the country without written consent of the Lieutenant-Governor.

This worked well with the Indians when they were rounded up, placed on reserves and watched with keenest attention. Soon the liquor trade with red men was just about nil. On the other hand the white settlers felt aggrieved, believing that certain inalienable rights had been taken from them when the law was put into force. Smugglers thrived everywhere in spite of the utmost efforts of the police and the fact that informers were paid half of every fat fine in every case they were able to prove against participants in the trade. Proportionate to the per capita population the police were very much more numerous than they

1885

By the census of that year there were not more than 2500 white people in the ranch districts of Calgary, Lethbridge and Macleod. Not more than 1400 of these were men of drinking age. Yet, in that year, one in every 16 men was arrested for smuggling or selling liquor and one in every 27 was convicted. These figures do not include drunks, nor do they show how many smugglers and dealers were not caught. There was one police constable for every seven white men in the district.

are at the present time, even when town constables and city forces are considered. But prohibition was more than they could handle. They watched the boundaries, railroad and trails, and yet the stuff slipped through in spite of all. Any man who wanted a drink could get it with a little trouble and a half a dollar. Hundreds of convictions ranging from fines of one to five hundred dollars or imprisonment were inflicted yearly, thousands of gallons of liquor were destroyed by the officers of the law, and yet drunkenness was more frequent per head of population than it is today. Death from excesses were not at all infrequent because the stuff the traders sold was usually absolute poison. It was a mixture of alcohol, blue-stone, water and tobacco juice, and it was the original old "forty-rod" guaranteed to kill at that distance. It came across the line in kerosene tins on the backs of pack horses, it came in barrels and in hollow iron wagon tongues. It was brought over in bags of grain, loads of hay, in shipments of sugar, coffee, tea, syrup. Every conceivable method of concealment was used. Once a shipment of Bibles arrived at a certain town and was so eagerly bought up that the police force decided to secure one. They did and found a neatly finished, black-backed, gilt-edged metal casket filled with whisky. Sometimes it was shipped very frankly in kegs and consigned to some fictitious person. The police who watched every train would set a guard on these kegs in order to capture the guilty ones when they came for their property. Then it was up to the liquor men to steal the kegs from under the eyes of the police. Many times they succeeded, and often they were caught, but it was no disgrace in prohibition days to be convicted of having at least tried to evade the liquor law. Once when an eagle-eyed constable sat through the night with his eyes fixed on some

1886

One in every 14 men was arrested for smuggling, keeping or selling liquor, while one in every 22 was convicted.

These figures do not include drunkenness. The police proportion was not more than one to every eight white men.

filled kegs on the station platform the owners of the kegs crept beneath the railroad platform, bored auger-holes through floor and kegs and drew off the contents, leaving the shells for the chagrined police.

One thing that helped the anti-prohibitionists and assisted in making the police powerless against smuggling was the permit system allowed by the government. The lieutenant-governor could give permission for a householder to have a limited quantity of liquor, usually two gallons, never more than five. Doctors, or members of parliament, or any reputable citizen could recommend the issuing of such a permit and it was generally accepted. The permit came back promptly excepting in the case of known hotel-keepers who were not allowed such a thing. But that was a small detail. A hotel proprietor would pay a man a dollar and advance the fee for applying for a permit. The man would go to some prominent citizen, have his recommendation approved by that citizen, send to the government and receive his permit. Then he would buy his two gallons or whatever it was and would consume it alone or in company of friends. Then he would turn the permit over to the hotel man. The latter always had a dozen or more such permits on hand. In some safe cache he would keep a store of liquor, and every morning would bring from it a sufficient quantity to meet the full amount of permits he possessed. Police constables would check up his stock with his permits, find them correct and find themselves helpless. Then the hotel man took chances and retailed the goods to the thirsty and trustworthy public. Usually the permits were checked up every day, but few bonifaces were careless enough to be caught napping.

In the eastern provinces of the Dominion where the prohibition party was strong the organization pointed

1887

One man in every 25 was arrested for keeping, selling or smuggling liquor, while one in every 34 was convicted.

Drunks are not included in these figures. The wholesale abuse of permits protected hundreds of violations.

with pride to the territories, and took considerable satisfaction to themselves in their success in having the prohibition law established. They saw in it an opening wedge to a Canada-wide prohibition. When they learned of the actual conditions in the "dry" territory they discounted the news to practically nothing, declaring that it was simply manufactured information from the ranks of anti-prohibition. Yet those who knew were finally forced to reluctantly admit the truth and the failure. Lieutenant-Governor Edgar Dewdney, a prohibitionist in principle, said as early as 1888 that the system was at fault and could not be operated. Even before Dewdney expressed this opinion the police had recognized its truth and had tried tentatively for some change to better conditions. After Dewdney had spoken they came out more strongly. Major Sam Steele of the N. W. M. P. reported in 1889:—

"The liquor laws at present in force are unpopular and very difficult to enforce. The reason for passing the Act was to prevent the sale to Indians and for that purpose it answered very well. Six months after the arrival of the police the illicit traffic in liquor was suppressed and no trouble has since been experienced among the Indians from this source. But when applied to whites it is a very different thing. The illicit traffic has the sympathy of the public and the experience of the police force has shown that there is more drunkenness and more injury to the health of individuals through this law than if respectable houses were licensed. Under the system of smuggling which prevails the dealer brings in pure alcohol and by mixture of pernicious drugs and water makes it into an article resembling whisky in color but most dangerous in effect."

The same year Superintendent McIlree, N.W.M.P.,

1888

This was the year 4 per cent beer was introduced and the sale made legal. Smuggling and bad whisky suffered. Yet, with one policeman to every ten men there was one in every 24 men arrested for selling, keeping or smuggling liquor. One in every 33 convicted. These figures do not include drunks.

said in his report:—

“There is no doubt that the time has arrived for some change in the liquor laws. At the present time the existing laws are not obeyed or respected by the mass of the inhabitants of the Northwest. It is evaded and set at naught by many.”

Then in the latter months of 1888 Mr. George P. Bliss, G.W.P. of the Sons of Temperance for Manitoba and the North West, visited Calgary and other points in Alberta and as a result had to acknowledge the failure of the permit system and the prevalent resultant abuses. In January of 1889 he sent a long letter to the Canada Citizen, the official organ of the temperance party in Canada, in which he said:—

“It is hard for me, a prohibitionist, to be compelled to advocate that which is against my work, yet for the good of the country as a whole I cannot be a traitor to my honor to say else than that which I see is the only salvation in the long run in this fine country, viz., a stringent license law in preference to the existing state of affairs under the law now completely ignored. Liquor which has never paid a cent of revenue and, worse than that, which was made right in the heart of this country at \$1 a gallon and sold for \$6 and retailed at fifty cents a glass is openly used as a beverage seems to me to cry to us in accents mocking ‘where are your laws and its guardians!’ It must take a small fortune to be a moderate drinker here, twenty-five cents for two drinks of Royal’s four per cent, as it is called here, and fifty cents per glass for a liquid called whisky which almost kills at sight. Yet this sort of life is winked at by those who should know better. I heard of eight hundred gallons of smuggled whisky being put away in a church and I heard of an offer of \$200 to a respectable man to haul fifty gallons of whisky a half a mile. The police do

1889

With 4 per cent beer sold freely, and with one policeman to every ten or twelve men, one in every 29 was arrested for selling, keeping or smuggling whisky. One in every 40 was convicted. The wholesale abuse of permits was still extensive.

the best they can, but it is said that the police may patrol the line on the frontier shoulder to shoulder and it could pass in."

Mr. Bliss' frankness in admitting failure aroused much bitter criticism among temperance people further east, while the Canada Citizen itself refused to be persuaded of failure despite the necessity of acknowledging the inefficiency of the Act. It says:—

"A license law is a curse. A licensed liquor shop is worse than an illicit groggery. It would be better to have liquor sold in dives and dens than to have it sold in respectable bar-rooms."

For a long time after this the government would not admit error. All sorts of evidence was adduced to prove that permits and prohibition could not and never would be a success. Almost every man in the country was more or less guilty of violation, either actively or passively. Breweries could manufacture beer to four per cent proof of alcohol or weight, I think it was weight, and sell it; residents could get permits for certain quantities; cheap, poisonous liquors were smuggled in and sold in place of properly inspected and graded spirits as would be the result in case the traffic were legally recognized. Eventually in 1892 the license liquor law was passed, a law similar in most points to the one at present in force. A good result was at once noticed by the police. Their reports speak of a reduced percentage of drunkenness, less inclination to excesses, a better observance of law, and an improvement in hotel accommodations for the public. Even the health of drinking men was bettered and there were fewer deaths from liquor abuses. This latter was due to the better grades of spirits and to the fact that more men were modifying their appetites now they could legally acquire liquor whenever they wished. The permit law had failed, but times were more peaceful with the police and smuggling was dead.

1890

One in every 22 was arrested for whisky violations. One in every 29 was convicted. These figures do not include drunks.

1891

The population by the 1891 census shows not more than 2900 males over 18 years of age in Lethbridge, Calgary and Macleod districts. Out of these one in every 30 was arrested and one in every 40 was convicted of selling, smuggling or having whisky illegally. These figures do not include cases of drunkenness.